HOME STUDY COURSE

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VI.—The Knickerbocker Group.

No writer of Irving's genius could spring up in a barren age without inspiring such mediocre talent as might be inclined to lethargy. The mere stirring of fallow ground will send up unsuspected growths, and the awakening which the keen humorist gave the drowsy men of Manhattan started a crop of letters among other effects of the shock. If the name of the Knickerbocker school be too large for the little group of authors who followed Diedrich, the historian, afar, it may be said that the term was applied to less dignified objects in the day of its immense popularity and to more worthy ones since.

The New York Evening Post had been established in the first year of the century with a hospitable policy toward letters, as well as a critical spirit which enhanced the honor of appearing in its columns. To gain admittance to them was next to having a book published. On the street and in coffee houses were knots of young men with corresponding ambitions notwithstanding the commercial bias of the city and the material bent of the age. Foremost among them was a banker's clerk who was not so far lost in arithmetical figures that he could not appreciate poetical and even wished that he might "lounge upon a rainbow and read Tom Campbell," a sentiment with which a bystander agreed. In this way Fitz-Greene Halleck and Joseph Rodman Drake became acquainted in the spring of 1819, the beginning of a literary companionship as intimate as it was brief, for Drake died the next year.

Judged by what he had begun to do, this young poet was cut down at the opening of a promising career. His early essays found their subjects for satire in the topics of the town, but descriptive and patriotic pieces soon followed, the address to the American flag deserving a higher place than all that have succeeded it. A more remarkable feat was the production in two or three days of "The Culprit Fay" in refutation of an assertion that it would be difficult to write a fairy poem purely imaginative without the aid of human characters. He accomplished this work with no nearer approach to humanity than in these two lines:

> For an Ouphe has broken his vestal vow;
> He has loved an earthly maid.

The rest is the fanciful account of the consequences of such a high misdemeanor, full of delicate art and the traceries of an imagination at home with the hidden things of nature, itself idealized and peopled with intelligences of the poet's own creating. It is the midsummer night's dream of an airy fancy.

The entire poem should be the delight of children who dwell on the border land of the seen and the unseen.

Halleck survived to write an elegy upon his friend, which shows how far the art had progressed since the days of Mather; also to continue the strain of American verse which the two friends had joined in contributing to the columns of The Evening Post. Afterward he was stirred by the wrongs of suffering Greece to lift up the voice of freedom in "Marco Bozzaris." Whoever has lost a friend of his youth will associate with the recollection of his sorrow the lament of Halleck for his companion, beginning:

> Green be the turf above thee,
> Friend of my better days!
> None knew thee but to love thee
> Nor named thee but to praise.

Clement C. Moore has a place among the writers who were inspired by Dutch traditions to produce a Knickerbocker literature. No doubt the theological professor expected to rest his fame upon the first Hebrew and English lexicon compiled in this country or upon his version of Lavardin's "History of George Castriot." Instead, when he is placed among the immortals it will be in recognition of his "Visit From St. Nicholas," which all children know begins:

> 'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
> Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.

Gulian C. Verplanck was a New Yorker whose services to literature entitle him to mention. First a lawyer, then a politician and afterward a lecturer in divinity, his pen was seldom idle. "Essays on Revealed Religion" and the "Doctrine of Contrasts" were the more substantial results, while "The State Triumvirate" and "The Ceremony of Installation" are in a lighter vein. As a member of congress he was prominent in obtaining the extension of the term of copyright from 28 to 42 years. Later he was associated with Sands and Bryant in The Talisman, a publication containing some of the best writing of the time. In his addresses on art, history and literature and "The Influence and Use of Liberal Studies," and especially on "The American Scholar," he anticipated some of the more recent essayists and orators who have made kindred themes the subjects of high discussion.

William Cullen Bryant may be considered as an adopted member of the Knickerbocker group since he was not born in New York, but on the Hampshire hills of western Massachusetts. However, he was not long in finding his way to the metropolis and to the little circle which made it the literary center of the country at the time. A copy of Irving's "Knickerbocker" had traveled into the lonely village where young Bryant was reading law and gave him a taste of what was possible in lower latitudes. Hitherto his reading had been among the professional books of his father's medical library, varied by the Latin poets, the Greek Testament, Watts' hymns, Pope's "Iliad" and an unusual number of English classics for that period. But meter and rhyme were a part of his nature and blossomed out in juvenile verses, religious and political, to the delight of his father and to his own subsequent chagrin.

To these there were two notable exceptions, left at home when he went away to practice law in Great Barrington. His father found them one day six years afterward when rummaging in a drawer, read them himself and to a neighbor and without asking his son's permission started posthaste for Boston and the editor of The North American Review, then a two-year-old magazine.

If this overland journey of 100 miles was a remarkable instance of paternal pride, there was something to warrant it, for one of the poems was, "Thanatopsis" and the other "An Inscription Upon the Entrance to a Wood." The first of these was enough to establish the youth as a poet of no common order. It came to a reflective people in an age when the shadow of gloom had not entirely passed, having a sad note that appeals to every reader in sober days and raising visions of the sublimity, majesty and vastness of the universe which bring a pleasing awe to the soul of man in the presence of infinity and futurity. It is a poem of the intellect rather than the heart, grand, austere, solemn, a funeral anthem of the human race.

> The golden sun,
> The planets, all the infinite host of heaven,
> Are shining on the sad abodes of death
> Through the still lapse of ages.

But he wrote other poems that readers like better than this requiem of the universe, and in them all is the note of nature, struck by a sympathetic observer not of her gracious moods alone, but of the severe and fateful as well. Out of them all, however, he drew lessons of truth or beauty or morals. He finds the law of guidance in the flight of the lone waterfowl across the December sky and of hope in the fringed gentian blossoming on the border of winter. "The Forest Hymn," "The Death of the Flowers," "The Song of the Lover" and others longer or shorter are charged with the bloom of summer and frosts of winter and tinted with the hues of spring and autumn. He inclines to the last season with the sober inheritance from a Puritan ancestry and writes:

> The melancholy days are come, the saddest of the year,
> Of wailing winds and naked woods and meadows brown and sere.

Yet into "The Little People of the Snow" he has put a sympathetic strain, such as is not always found with eulogists of winter and never with shivering grumblers about it. But then he survived the rigors of 20 Cummington winters before he went to New York and the sultriness of as many summers and thereupon could also write:

> The quiet August noon has come.
> A slumbrous silence fills the sky;
> The fields are still: the woods are dumb;
> In glassy sleep the waters lie.

Open the volume of 116 poems anywhere and some phase of nature is presented, usually in her quiet majesty. Sometimes patriotic and national strains appear, as in "The Song of Marion's Men," "The Green Mountain Boys," "Our Country's Call" and "O Mother of a Mighty Race," but the return is speedy to "The White-Footed Deer," "The Hunter of the Prairies" and "The Death of the Flowers." He is pre-eminently the poet of the woods and waters, of earth and sky, of summer and winter, of the times and seasons, the days and the years.

Bryant's verse will always have its own charm for New Englanders and for their descendants, wherever they may live. They love the moods of nature with which the fathers played and fought by turns. The viking blood in their veins still makes them sing:

> The winds from off the Norseman's hills
> Do shriek a fearsome song:
> There's music in the shrieking winds
> That blow my bark along.

Besides, there is in his poems the flower of that imagination which, in spite of his pretended indifference, was in the Puritan's soul. It finally blossomed out early in this century like a crocus on the sunny edge of a snowdrift in northwestern Massachusetts. It reveled in the solemn, the sublime, the severe, as the forefathers had for 200 years. Moreover, the first great poet had all their conscientiousness in his performance of his task, even if he did break with their Calvinism. His measure is exact, his rhyme is perfect, and, more than all, his moral tone is without a flaw. There are in it both strength and health.

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